

It's a Small World After All

"It's a world of laughter, a world of tears, it's a world of hopes, it's a world of fear, there's so much that we share that it's time we're aware, it's a small world after all." Sherman Brothers, in the early 1960s, wrote this song for a Walt Disney show dedicated to the children of the world, with the hope to spread the message of peace and harmony.

Around the same time in several institutions across the globe, research had begun on *Packet Switching*. This would later form the basis of what we know today as internetworking or the more evolved *Internet*. The ferocity with which the Internet over the past decades has made our world "small" would have been unimaginable even to the Sherman brothers.

In the past ten years alone, with technologies such as search engines, chat rooms, instant messaging and social media we have managed to create a highly interconnected, interdependent and dynamic world. This has made our information universe expand, our national and cultural boundaries permeable and our outreach borderless. At the same time with every information about everyone and everything, whether individual or corporate or government being constantly recorded and never forgotten, we have managed to create a whole new way of life that did not even exist at the turn of the century.

This new way of life has started posing some pertinent and imperative questions about how we define our social interactions, our commercial transactions and our political decisions. Clearly, the legal framework in our nations and at the international institutions has not been prepared to meet this challenge. The task at hand is to understand comprehensively this new global social structure. And in the evolved context reexamine the laws that protect some of the most important pillars of our societies. These pillars are the fundamental principles on which many of our nations have been built and they define the role of an individual in a polity and a framework for the rights and duties for our citizens.

How the American society may view free speech may be different than how the Chinese view it, the norms of privacy and personal property can be very different in India and in the European Union, and the aspects of human dignity are deeply driven by cultural and religious conditioning. But it cannot be any more ignored that in the 21st century, photo shares, tweets, online videos and Facebook Likes, can create social revolutions, (Tahrir Square protests) and can shift global opinion (Occupy Wall Street movements).

Additionally, the advent of terrorism has given further access to personal information of individual citizens, for the sake of national and international security, which would have been out of bounds for governments just a few years ago. Couple that with the security concerns raised by recent global financial meltdown and there is hardly any information that you may consider private that can not be accessed by some agency in some part of the world.

The issue at hand is not just about free speech or privacy but it is about how we

will determine a new way of life and how we will discuss and converge on the very nature of the way humans interact and societies exchange information. This is therefore not a problem of one nation but an inherently global issue.

We may ask how much of the world population is truly impacted by this? As per the International Telecommunications Union, only 39% of the world population uses the Internet. Out of which 77% of the users are from the developed world. This leads to many developing nations simply citing "other more important issues" as priorities than debate about how the Internet is changing the nature of our social behavior and political thinking. But the Internet is a force multiplier and the number of users is always exponentially increasing.

For example, in India, between 2008 and 2012, a total of 88 million people started using the Internet but at the end of 2012, the number of people using the Internet went up to 137 million. Every five minutes, 8000 Indians post on Facebook, 15000 Indians view a YouTube video, and 1000 Indians tweet. And yet only about 11% of India's population is actively using Internet. What would transpire if this number was tripled in the next one year is anyone's guess. Therefore, the developing nations too cannot wait anymore to debate these matters!

Furthermore, the challenge is not about tackling the issues at the global level only, but it is also about preparing our citizens in our individual countries to fully comprehend the impact of the new technology they are embracing. Unless nations across the world undertake the task to educate their citizens about the new social realities they have inadvertently unveiled, how can they empower their people to participate, make choices and even vote on laws that would redefine their way of life?

In essence, the question is not of technology and how much restriction a law can put on it, but the question is about human values and understanding their multinational and multicultural impact. In the absence of an effort to create this awareness and mutual understanding, the laws we may frame may be short-lived, i.e., valid only till the next technology makes them invalid. Instead, if we examine the issue through the lenses of values and discuss it in the reference of individual, national and global moral compass, then we may have the opportunity to create a legal framework for this new way of life that is sustainable and sound in its foundations.

Is this possible? Can we do it? The world has done this before. Mitigation of the Ozone layer problem is a fine example of what global cooperation with deep mutual respect and understanding can do. More importantly, the technologies that have so precipitated these issues themselves can be used to create awareness, generate debates and converge opinions. In the times of rapid and unpredictable change may be it is time we turn to what remains time-tested and sound. Just as the Sherman Brothers wrote, "There is just one moon and one golden sun, and a smile means friendship to everyone. Though the mountains divide and the oceans are wide. It's a small small world "